

International salaries

Britain backs pay rise at CERN

Paris

FRENCH officials were surprised and "extremely disappointed" last December when Britain failed to follow a French move to stop an increase in the salaries of staff at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) near Geneva.

"We have told the British Science and Engineering Council [SERC] several times that we were afraid of the consequences of Britain leaving CERN" (a possibility threatened by the existence of the Kendrew committee, due to report this spring on the value of Britain's continued membership of the organization) "and we thought this was an opportunity to reduce costs", said a French research ministry spokesman last week.

According to SERC, however, Britain failed to respond because the French delegation had not first tested the ground with the other CERN members, but sprang the proposal out of the blue (a fact France admits) and because the sums involved were negligible and could not solve SERC's problems.

According to the French ministry, however, agreement to the French proposals, which might have been won with British backing, could have saved enough to buy Britain a place in the European Synchrotron Radiation Source, in which SERC has expressed an interest but claimed it cannot afford to participate.

The figures work out like this. The CERN budget is at present SF 703 million, or £230 million a year. Of this, 36 per cent is straight salaries (48 per cent including allowances), or some £83 million. Britain's contribution to CERN, based on gross national product, is 16 per cent, so its contribution to straight CERN salaries is around £13 million. CERN was asking for a salary increase (to match inflation in Geneva) of 4.39 per cent — meaning £570,000 to SERC. France planned to halve the proposed increase, on the grounds that government-supported staff throughout Europe were receiving salary increases below inflation, and that international organizations such as CERN should also bear some of the burden. If Britain and other members had agreed with the French proposal, therefore, SERC would have saved some £285,000 a year. Whether this is negligible or not is a matter for debate. In the event, however, only the Netherlands supported France and the full increase requested by CERN was granted.

Whether CERN salaries can be held down in future, however, is another question. CERN staff complain that their salaries have been eroded by inflation for a number of years, and that this year — after the first CERN Nobel prizes — they were surely due at least constant payment. In Britain, and in France (whose border with Switzerland CERN straddles), CERN

salaries look astronomical. In gross terms, they generally reflect Swiss incomes, but in net terms they exceed the Swiss as CERN staff do not pay tax. Compared with other international institutions, CERN salaries are low, however: they are thought to come below those of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, themselves below those of the European Commission in Brussels.

Also, according to a senior French physicist now working at CERN, there are great variations in circumstances at CERN. "But if you take the highest salaries here, they're double their equivalents in France." A French director of a laboratory of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifi-

que, France's premier research council, earns some FF 19,000 (£1,700) a month net of tax, the physicist estimated, compared with FF 37,000 (£3,400) for the equivalent job at CERN.

The physicist saw this, however, as less a condemnation of CERN than a social problem in the salary ratio between visitors and CERN incumbents. "In the 1960s perhaps only 10 per cent of the physicists at CERN were visitors", he said, "but now the proportion is nearer 80 per cent. These people "have a problem in living well" given the cost of living in the Geneva area, he said. However some visitors to CERN receive a cost-of-living bonus from their home countries. "The French receive nothing", said the CERN man, "the Italians and Germans a little. But the UK bonus is very good". **Robert Walgate**

UK industrial research

Bits and pieces of success

THE inconspicuous part of Britain's science establishment, that run by the Department of Trade and Industry, seems to be largely free from the constraints (mostly financial) that hamstringing the rest of it.

The department's science and technology report for 1983-84, published this week, shows an increase of support in these areas from £243 million in 1981-82 to £322 million last year. The buoyant growth is estimated (by last month's public expenditure survey) to have been continued in the present financial year to a peak (in real terms) of £383 million, whereafter spending is forecast to decline (in real terms).

This estimate seems certain, however, to be overtaken by events. The department's spending on space research and development (£63 million this year) may well increase as a consequence of last week's bullish British statement on the US space station at Rome (see p. 422).

At the same time, the department has been forced by the booming demand for grants for industrial research and development from industrial companies to halt its schemes in this area (from 1 November last) pending the outcome of a review due to be completed early in April. Some in industry fear the outcome will be more stringent criteria for making grants, the original purpose of which included that of tempting British industrial companies to appreciate the value of research.

The department's umbrella covers four substantial but now inconspicuous laboratories, including the National Physical Laboratory (with a budget of £19 million last year), the National Engineering Laboratory (£11 million), the Warren Spring Laboratory (£2.65 million) and the Laboratory of the Government Chemist, recently boasting of being at the cutting-edge of biotechnology in Britain, which appears to cost the Department of Trade and Industry virtually nothing, recovering its

costs by money transfers from other government departments.

The general impression of these laboratories offered in the report is unexciting; the Laboratory of the Government Chemist goes so far as to describe an important part of its programme (on the anaerobic digestion of waste materials, chiefly sewage) as "un glamorous". And the National Physical Laboratory, once (immediately after the First World War) the only British laboratory of importance, is described in terms suggesting a mundane interest in the minutiae of the application of metrology to the provision of secondary standards for British industry, although the laboratory is given credit for having developed a microwave system for measuring plasma temperature in the Joint European Torus, the thermonuclear apparatus being operated in Britain by a consortium of European governments.

Space research apart, information technology emerges as the department's chief interest in industrial development, not exclusively through the Alvey programme (which began spending its budget of £350 million last year). Last year's report tells of remotely controlled TV cameras and digital telephone exchanges developed for Malawi.

The record of how more than £300 million was spent last year is nevertheless more a catalogue of miscellaneous achievements, mostly small, than an account of a coherent strategy for the encouragement of industrial development. To some extent, the department's research and development programme is a prisoner of past commitments (as to the aircraft and textile industries), to other sections of industry (represented by "requirements boards") and of its resources (laboratories, people). But for an organization whose long-term objectives are economic, a more analytical account of how the money has been spent would be more appropriate. □